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TITLE INFORMATION

AMERICAN NOCTURNE

Ed. by Stevens, Elisabeth

BrickHouse Books, Inc.

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BOOK REVIEW

Unaffected and affirmative lyric poetry on cycles of aging, death and rebirth.

In her aptly titled new collection, Stevens (*Sirens' Songs*, 2011, etc.) offers poetry true to the best qualities of the nocturne tradition—atmospheric, tranquil, dusky and musical verses—while inflecting it with an undeniably American optimism. “Night is moving across the country,” she concedes, and soon, the lands will be “engulfed in charcoal twilight / darker than mud in long-tilled fields.” But, she writes, this is no cause for fear, for this is a “comforting darkness” that descends like “the most gentle, the most tender caress.” Setting the tone for the rest of the volume, the eponymous opening poem reinterprets the dread promise of twilight as an invitation to rest and reflection, a space for quiet contemplation and conversation with familiar shadows. In this vein, the poem concludes with the unusual invocation: “Let night cover the country: / let soft, shrouding darkness soothe, cradle, heal. / Let the night be long.” Though wise, Stevens’ narrators are still prone to their own fears of the dark and cold. Trapped without electricity by an early snow, they hide “fears of a winter // worse than any, a season / forever-long. / Its frost could freeze us blind, // shroud us in mist with / no escape.” And when, in “Ugly April,” a late freeze strikes, the narrator personalizes and embodies the damage, noting that “at a dark and early hour, / those soft, pink magnolia petals / brown, fade, shrivel, fall. / They rest on cold ground—hundreds, / too many to number. They resemble / pale shards of torn flesh.” They courageously celebrate opportunities for phantasmal visitations—whether encountering a “decade-dead friend” and a “two-decades dead husband” on the side of the road or remembering a “mother’s voice / on the phone, louder than usual, / as if to bridge invisible distance”—but fail in courage when confronted by a terminally ill friend: “the terrible odor of her mortality escapes her mouth. // It carries charnel fear. We smell it. Our words falter.” They are, in short, fully and beautifully human, frightened and frail, but endowed with faith, hope and vision.

Unpretentiously revelatory poetry that hums a comforting, melodic tune through the night, heralding the arrival of a new day.

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